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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: ABKHAZIA SITUATION UNTENABLE

REF: A. A) TBILISI 2176

[B](#). B) TBILISI 2053

[C](#). C) TBILISI 1988

[D](#). D) TBILISI 2190

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#). (C) Summary and comment. During December 2-3 meetings in Zugdidi, government officials, EUMM and UNOMIG monitors, and NGO representatives all told the Ambassador that the security situation in and outside Abkhazia is precarious, with frequent violent incidents and provocations. Georgian police along the administrative boundary in particular face constant threats. Government officials, as well as EUMM and UNOMIG personnel all affirmed that these incidents have been instigated by the Abkhaz and/or Russians (it is difficult to say which), and that Georgian forces are showing real restraint in not responding in a like manner. All interlocutors also said that living conditions for villagers along both sides of the boundary, Georgians in Gali, and IDPs outside Abkhazia are difficult. The Abkhaz and Russians have tightened the boundary; the population in the area, beyond living in fear, therefore also faces limitations on movement.

The Abkhaz and/or Russians may even seek to annex what has been (up-to-now) indisputable Georgian territory north of the Enguri River. The situation is clearly untenable. Although establishing a buffer zone might seem like an attractive option in the short term, it could also turn into a de facto recognition of the new state, and the Georgian government has indicated it would rather engage now to find a solution. If the other side is open to it, cooperation is likely to be a more sustainable approach in the long term -- and the more likely to preserve Georgia's territorial integrity. End summary and comment.

Security along the ABL: An oxymoron

[2](#). (C) Samegrelo Governor Zaza Gorozia, Regional Police Chief Tengiz Gunava, EUMM Field Office Commander Lorenzo Tavella, UNOMIG Deputy Operations Officer (U.S. Army Captain) Matthew Pearce, and several representatives of local NGOs all described for the Ambassador a tense environment on both sides of the administrative boundary line. Both Tavella and Pearce, as well as Georgian officials, said the Abkhaz and Russians were clearly the source of the provocations. Gunava noted that this first week of December was the first week since the war that had not had a major security incident -- yet we heard from UNOMIG that an elderly woman from Nabakevi was found dead that very day, apparently having been abducted for ransom some days earlier and then beaten. Gunava added that two Georgian police officers had been shot in the head in recent weeks by snipers, explaining that analysis of the bullets indicated that special sniper rifles employed only by Russians were used. Pearce reviewed several of the most recent incidents: November 20 attack on Georgian Interior

Ministry post in Ganmukhuri (ref A), which included the laying of pop-up anti-personnel mines; November 15 ambush at Kalagali on Georgian Interior Ministry forces, with one fatality (ref A); November 14 explosion at a Muzhava power station (ref A), as a result of which local residents still lack power; October 25 explosion in Eritskali with two fatalities, including the district administrator (ref B); the destruction of bridges and general canalization of movements into Abkhazia (ref B); and October 19 attack on an Interior Qinto Abkhazia (ref B); and October 19 attack on an Interior Ministry building in Khurcha (ref C).

13. (C) Particularly telling is the recent discussion between the EUMM and the Georgian Interior Ministry regarding the use of armored vehicles. Italian and Polish components of the EUMM use armored vehicles near Abkhazia and South Ossetia, respectively. The Interior Ministry recently announced its intention to deploy so-called COBRA armored vehicles, which resemble those used by the Italians and Poles. Gunava explained the introduction of the vehicles as a security measure, to protect his officers who have increasingly become targets. As EUMM officials have explained to us in Tbilisi, the EUMM has asked that the Interior Ministry reconsider deployment, because it is worried that the Abkhaz or Russians (or South Ossetians) could mix up the vehicles and target EU monitors. The EUMM has applied bright blue and yellow tape to its own vehicles to render them more easily visible and identifiable, and Gunava explained that the Interior Ministry's vehicles will also be plainly labeled. Thus not only do both the Interior Ministry and the EUMM consider the use of armored vehicles near the boundaries important to their personnel's safety, but they both recognize that Interior Ministry forces are likely to be the specific target

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of attacks. Although UNOMIG did not see a direct threat to its own personnel at this time, it did raise UNOMIG safety as a concern for the future.

14. (C) Beyond safety concerns, both EUMM and UNOMIG indicated that their ability to implement their missions in general is hampered by a lack of cooperation by the Abkhaz and Russians. Although UNOMIG is able to cross the boundary without difficulty, it often encounters resistance from individual Abkhaz (not Russian) forces; its patrols are sometimes prevented from proceeding past individual Abkhaz checkpoints (ref B). The EUMM has been unable to gain access to Abkhazia at all (one of the two patrols it tried to send in was turned around at gunpoint -- ref A), and both the Abkhaz and Russians have essentially refused to be in regular contact with them.

15. (C) The governor, the EUMM and UNOMIG identified territory north of the Enguri River, but under Georgian control (i.e., and on the Georgian side of the administrative boundary), as primary targets for attacks and therefore areas of particular concern. Nearly all of the major incidents have occurred in these locations, including the ones in Ganmukhuri, Kalagali, Muzhava, Eritskali, and Khurcha, and the international monitors now refer to this region as the "triangle of death." Georgian officials have in the past suggested that the Abkhaz and/or Russians would like to gain control of these areas, thereby making the Enguri River the effective administrative boundary. EUMM personnel strongly echoed this concern, although UNOMIG personnel were not convinced actual annexation was the goal. The governor said that Abkhaz de facto "Defense Minister" Kishmaria recently visited Ganmukhuri and encouraged locals to accept Russian patronage, but was rebuffed.

16. (C) Of particular strategic concern is the triangle of land west of the Enguri Dam; if the Abkhaz or Russians controlled this area, they would control the Enguri power generation facility in total, and could deprive Georgia of a key energy resource. (Note: The Enguri power station is in Abkhaz controlled territory, while the dam is part of

undisputed Georgia. The Enguri facility provides approximately 40 percent of Georgia's winter electricity. End note.) Both the governor and staff at the dam itself downplayed an immediate threat to the electricity. They suggested that the Abkhaz and Russians would only seriously consider cutting Georgia off from the electricity if they physically controlled the dam itself, because otherwise Georgia could simply stop the flow of water to the power plant and cut off Abkhazia too (ref D). (Note: If they were to gain control of the Muzhava-Eritskali-Kalagali triangle, however, the Abkhaz and Russians would be one step closer to physical occupation of the dam. End note.)

17. (C) The governor suggested that rifts have appeared between the Abkhaz and the Russians. He told one story about an altercation between Abkhaz and Russian forces at a restaurant in Sukhumi, which ended with 20 Abkhaz being beaten up by Russian soldiers. The dispute arose when the Russians suggested that the Abkhaz had better not forget who their patrons were. In another case, the Russians dismissed a local hero from the earlier war in Abkhazia from his important and lucrative position as shift leader at the Enguri Power Plant, installing their own person instead. As QEnguri Power Plant, installing their own person instead. As Gorozia explained, the Abkhaz are getting frustrated with the Russians, but they are in no position to express that frustration. The EUMM and UNOMIG noted that the Abkhaz have gradually been taking control of control points on the boundary, and both agreed that the main interest in maintaining those points was economic. UNOMIG portrayed this as a significant shift, and said that in recent weeks Abkhaz have been somewhat more tolerant about letting people cross the boundary. The governor downplayed the shift's significance, however, noting that the Russians still have their own checkpoints not far behind the Abkhaz.

Basic human rights: Difficult to defend or improve

18. (C) All our interlocutors emphasized that life for local residents on both sides of the boundary has become very difficult. At the most basic level, the ongoing violence has raised everyone's concern for their own safety. NGO representatives noted the particular vulnerability felt by villagers north of the Enguri, such as Pakhulani and Mujava -- i.e., in the same triangle north of the Enguri. UNOMIG reported that some villagers have sent their children away to stay with relatives. Freedom of movement across the boundary

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has been severely restricted, although UNOMIG reported some easing in recent weeks. For ethnic Georgians in Gali, crossing into undisputed Georgian territory has become more difficult and more expensive. Since the destruction of several pedestrian bridges in recent weeks (ref C), which UNOMIG blamed squarely on the Russians, only four crossing points remain: at Ganmukhuri, Khurcha, Rukhi (the main bridge between Zugdidi and Gali), and Pakhulani. Individuals can and do make informal crossings, including by fording the river, but stories of newly laid mines along the northern bank of the Enguri -- which the governor and UNOMIG personnel both said are true -- have limited those options. According to the governor, the going rate to cross (in both directions) is 30 lari (about \$18), versus 6 lari before the war. As NGO representatives pointed out, the monthly allowance given to Georgians in Gali -- which must be picked up in Zugdidi -- is only 28 lari, making the stipend worthless for most. One small ray of hope emerged on December 4, when UNOMIG reported that local Abkhaz forces gave permission to locals to repair a rail bridge at Tagiloni, thereby opening the possibility of one more crossing point.

19. (C) Meanwhile internally displaced persons (IDPs) from the August and earlier conflicts require attention. The governor said Zugdidi received only a few dozen IDP families from the most recent war, but the region of Samegrelo still has a total of 90,000 IDPs. He acknowledged that resentment among

the older generation of the assistance given to the newer IDPs has become an issue. He said the government intends to focus on the problem in 2009 by taking a census of all current IDPs and getting a more precise picture of the scope of the issue. NGO representatives reinforced the seriousness of this growing resentment and added their complaint that in general western Georgia receives less attention from donors than the rest of the country.

¶10. (C) Compounding these difficulties are economic ones arising from the war and the global economic crisis. According to the governor, the price of hazelnuts -- a primary export from the region -- has dropped by two-thirds, and 70% of the crop remains unsold. More generally, agriculture as a whole, especially any enterprises that depend on import and export, has been hit hard. Furthermore, credit difficulties have stopped current projects and blocked new ones, such as in construction. One big project in Poti, for example, that would have employed 400 people has stopped. The governor said he begins every day reading the financial information from the Asian markets, because they have such a big impact on his region's welfare. (Note: The UAE Rakeen Group completed the 100 percent purchase of the Port of Poti on December 2, and have pledged to bring 20,000 jobs to the region (septel). End note.)

Comment: It's time to find a way to rebuild bridges

¶11. (C) The only thing more striking than the extent of the pressures currently weighing on both the Georgian Interior Ministry and the local population is the willingness so far of both groups to hang in there without responding in kind or fleeing. Governor Gorozia called the police officers who faced Russian troops during the war heroes, and we could say the same for the forces who try to maintain a secure environment for the local population -- and for the residents themselves. (Embassy note: Deputy Interior Minister Zguladze told a visiting Washington delegation that more Georgian street cops have died in the post-conflict period than died during the war. End note.) The situation clearly cannot continue much longer, however, without a major escalation and/or yet another humanitarian crisis. A senior Interior Ministry official told us December 8 he estimated that 3,000 Georgians would leave Gali by spring if current conditions do not change.

¶12. (C) A way forward is needed. The Georgian foreign and reintegration ministers have both recently signaled to us their commitment to engage, not isolate, both Abkhazia and South Ossetia. We see this as a hopeful sign of sincere interest in cooperation, which can help the sides address both security and human rights concerns. It takes two to tango, of course, and we still need to find a way to convince the other side to go along. One of the difficulties is that the "other side" consists of two parties, and it is difficult to distinguish their different motivations and interests. We have seen some slight but tantalizing hints (such as UNOMIG's reports of an ease in movement restrictions and permission to rebuild a bridge) that some of the Abkhaz, at least, might be starting to realize the importance of cooperation. Although

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security concerns might make a strictly enforced buffer zone appealing in the short term, we think working toward cooperation is the more sustainable approach -- and the one more likely to protect Georgia's territorial integrity in the long run.

TEFFT